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Title:

Mobilising Affect and Trauma: The Politics of Gendered Memory and Gendered Silence

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Abstract:

In recent years there has been a flurry of activity and controversy around the subject of public memory. Forms of cultural heritage, especially statues, have been variously lobbied for, defaced, re-storied or removed. Collectively these protest events and movements draw our attention to the potency and affective potential of public memory. This is true whatever the nature of the 'institution' doing the remembering, for example, a public statue or a museum or an organised body of protesters. Recognising that some memories are fragile, gendered, racialised, ethnicised and nationalised, this article establishes this special forum's investigation into the gendered mobilisation of affect, trauma and memory. Whereas some contributions explore the ways in which women's traumatic pasts are since remembered, misremembered, mediated or silenced, others look at how recalling or failing to recall certain versions of the past inflicts trauma on some women in the present. Through looking at the forces acting on representations of the past, and emotions elicited both through telling and hearing about various pasts, as well as not telling and not hearing about various pasts, we suggest new ways of thinking about the nexus between gender, agency, affect and memory.

Keywords:

Activism, Affect, Trauma, Gendered Memory, Historical Silences, Intersectional Feminism

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Article:

Introduction

In recent years there has been a flurry of activity and controversy around the subject of public memory.

Tangible cultural heritage, especially statues, have been variously lobbied for, defaced, re-storied or removed. This has happened in the United States where activists conducted a successful, although not uncontentious, campaign to establish a statue to a real woman in New York City's Central Park.

Disagreement arose when women of colour were omitted from the initial successful design which included suffragist pioneers Susan B. Anthony (1820–1906) and Elizabeth Cady Stanton (1815–1902).¹ Others have grouped together to deface or remove monuments that pay homage to racist pasts, including Confederate and General Robert E. Lee (1807–1870) statues in southern states in the US. This was notable in 2017 when agitation over racialised legacies of the American Civil War erupted and Charlottesville, Virginia was home to violent clashes between white supremacists and anti-fascist protesters. As one journalist put it in 2017, discomfort over public representations of the past is not new. 'The debate about Confederate statues now raging across the US is not new', she wrote. 'It has simmered for decades.'² It was at this moment that a coalescence of political and social forces created collective recognition that 'American public space needed a politicized renovation'.³

In another settler-colonial state, Australia, commentary in recent years has highlighted public apathy about public memorialisation. In 2017, Indigenous journalist and writer, Stan Grant, wrote an article 'America tears down its racist history, we ignore ours'. He cited the example of a statue of Captain James Cook (1728–1779) in Sydney accompanied by a plaque bearing the words: 'DISCOVERED THIS

TERRITORY 1770'. No one, Grant said, had questioned the statue or its inscription yet it was blatantly untrue. As he pondered the questions of 'heritage and hate', he confirmed that Indigenous Australians had been on the land at least 65,000 years before Cook arrived. What this lack of questioning re-established for Indigenous people was that 'this statue speaks to emptiness, it speaks to our invisibility; it says that nothing truly mattered, nothing truly counted until a white sailor first walked on these shores.'⁴ That environment has since changed. In June 2020, in Australia's annual Reconciliation Week, emotions ran high as protesters were energised by solidarity with the #BlackLivesMatter movement in the US and anger at the continuing deaths of Aboriginal people in police custody. In Sydney, police were deployed to protect the Cook statue from attack.⁵

In South Africa, efforts to unseat racist historical figures were more successful. In 2015, students celebrated the toppling of a statue of British colonialist Cecil Rhodes (1853–1902) at the University of Cape Town, an act supported by the university council. International news coverage of the event reported that 'Some students in the crowd of hundreds slapped the statue as it came down amid ululating and cries of "*amandla*" (power), while others splashed red paint on it and wrapped Rhodes's head in paper.' Some white South Africans asserted that their heritage was under threat by these memory activisms.⁶

Collectively these protest events and movements draw our attention to the potency and affective potential of public memory. This is true whatever the nature of the 'institution' doing the remembering—for example, a public statue or a museum or an organised body of protesters. As discussed further below, memory controversies are useful for the light they shine on two interrelated relationships: the memory—activism nexus and the nexus between memory, trauma and affect. They reveal much about agency and power differentials as some groups demand and effect change while others remain silent and invisible. Who mediates memory? Who gets to decide about who is remembered and what form that takes? Who feels entitled to demand that the memory landscape change? How the past is represented publicly can elicit a range of emotions, from pride to anger and sadness, in those engaging with the memorialisation. It can also produce or reproduce trauma. The absence of certain pasts in the memory landscape, too, can produce or reproduce trauma. Who is consulted about the appropriate nature and form of the memorialisation of certain pasts? All of these considerations are especially important when we are dealing with traumatic pasts like

slavery, genocide and colonisation, where remembering must be sensitively handled so that past traumas are not repeated.

The articles in this special forum link gender, memory, trauma and affect in different ways. Some explore the ways in which women's traumatic pasts are since remembered, misremembered, mediated or silenced. Others investigate how recalling or failing to recall certain versions of the past inflicts trauma on some women in the present. Some focus on violent pasts while others look at histories of hope and solidarity. All articles in the forum demonstrate a sensitivity to exposing and examining the limitations as well as the possibilities of remembering. They acknowledge that some versions of the past occupy a privileged place in mainstream societies. Narratives of nationalism and military glory or defeat exemplify this. Written by a group of feminist scholars, our authors are also aware that there have long been complexities in ensuring the successful transmission of intergenerational knowledge.⁷ Memories are fragile, gendered, racialised, ethnicised and nationalised. Attendant to the knowledge that history and memory are different, this collection of articles reveals a deep sensitivity to processes of mediating memory and conveying historical knowledge. They each prompt thought about what is at stake and for whom when people make decisions about which pasts to preserve, how these are recorded, why and how they are disseminated and to whom. Through looking at the forces acting on representations of the past, and emotions elicited both through telling and hearing about various pasts, as well as not telling and not hearing about various pasts, they suggest new ways of thinking about the nexus between gender, agency, affect and memory.

History and Memory

History and memory differ. History is what is retained in the historical record, while memory is a society's collective acts of remembering. Sarah Ferber asserts that history is often 'caricatured' as just a collection of facts and dates. 'Something general enters the category of "historical" when it is seen either as forgettable (because done with)', she writes 'or memorable (because influential or innovative)'.⁸ History may be diminished by those without knowledge of the discipline, but there is no doubting that the past is continually dwelled upon. It is 'invoked, reinterpreted, mobilized, politicized, condescended to and held up to scrutiny':

‘Daily, people make conscious and unconscious choices about the past and how to relate to it, manifested in decisions about whether to forget or to remember; regret or repudiate.’⁹ In their article in this issue, one examining organisers’, activists’ and the media’s various responses to historical precedents and controversies raised by the Women’s Marches between 2017 and 2022, Sharon Crozier-De Rosa and Vera Mackie affirm that people make conscious or unconscious choices about how to relate to the past. They all tend to have an opinion about history, even if it is to write it off as irrelevant.

Pierre Nora has characterised history as a discipline which ‘binds itself strictly to temporal continuities, to progressions and to relations between things’. It is relational.¹⁰ Memory, on the other hand, he conceives of as absolute:

On the one hand, we find an integrated, dictatorial memory—unself-conscious, commanding, all-powerful, spontaneously actualizing, a memory without a past that ceaselessly reinvents tradition, linking the history of its ancestors to the undifferentiated time of heroes, origins, and myths—and on the other hand, our memory, nothing more in fact than sifted and sorted historical traces.¹¹

According to Nora, the interplay between history and memory creates *lieux de mémoire*, or sites of memory, which ‘only exist because of their capacity for metamorphosis, an endless recycling of their meaning and an unpredictable proliferation of their ramification’.¹² Nora’s conceptualisation of *lieux de mémoire* has been since criticised for its focus on the nation-state and its officially sanctioned sites of memory.¹³ In this forum, we look at local and transnational ‘sites of memory’. We also examine multiple types of sites of memory—both tangible cultural heritage (museums, documentary and feature film, mediated testimonies) and intangible cultural heritage (such as the action of marching as memorialising)—and trace the evolving meaning given to and created by these sites. Our expanded archive of cultural forms of memory adheres closely to Michael Rothberg’s understanding of memory: ‘Not strictly separable from either history or representation, memory nonetheless captures simultaneously the individual, embodied and lived side *and* the collective, social, and constructed side of our relations to the past [emphasis in original].’¹⁴

Memory, then, is never fixed. It is fluid, mutable and contested. Particular figures move in and out of national or collective memory or the interpretations of their significance changes according to contemporary concerns. The statue wars mentioned above exemplify this. Astrid Erll proposes a framework for

understanding the changeability of memory, using the concept of ‘travelling memory’. She argues that ‘all cultural memory must “travel”, be kept in motion, in order to “stay alive”, to have an impact both on individual minds and social formations’.¹⁵ By ‘travel’, she means movements across territorial and social boundaries but, on a more fundamental level, she also means ‘the ongoing exchange of information between individuals and minds and media which first of all generates what [Maurice] Halbwachs termed collective memory’,¹⁶ and Guy Beiner called ‘social’ remembrance, to avoid ‘giving an impression of collective homogeneity’.¹⁷

Each contribution to this forum looks at travelling memory in both senses of the meaning explained here. They examine the interactions and meaning-making between, for example, museum and visitor, marcher and media, film and viewer, and speaker and listener. Katharine McGregor and Ana Dragojlovic, in ‘“They Call me Babu”: The Politics of Silence and Gendered Memories of Dutch Colonialism in Indonesia’, examine reception of a Dutch-Indonesian film-maker’s semi-documentary film about domestic workers in late colonial Indonesia. In ‘Testimonies of affect: Native American women’s histories of violence on California’s Pacific north coast’, Victoria Haskins analyses the testimonies of First Nations’ women—often mediated through white interlocutors—who experienced violence on the Pacific coast of what is now the US state of California. Eveline Buchheim, in ‘The Motif of Tears: Representations of Activism and Suffering in the Liji Alley Museum in Nanjing’, analyses a museum dedicated to the victims and survivors of militarised sexual abuse in the Asia-Pacific War. In her contribution, Ana Stevenson looks at another form of memory-making through film. In ‘Screening Women’s History in the Film *Suffragette* (2015): Between Intersectional Feminist Activism and Historical Memory’, she investigates the reception of the slogan ‘I’d rather be a rebel than a slave’ used in publicity for the first cinematic feature film to focus exclusively on British militant suffragists, the Women’s Social and Political Union (WSPU). Finally, in ‘Rallying Women: Archives, Activism and Affect’, Crozier-De Rosa and Mackie look at the 2017 Women’s March and subsequent marches to analyse how organisers and marchers, as well as the media, responded to historical precedents, created historical controversies and made history themselves.

All the articles in this forum also have a transnational dimension so they speak to how memory is constructed—successfully or with difficulty—across boundaries and frontiers, whether in terms of territory

or colonial-postcolonial mentalities. They detail: First Nations women recounting memories of colonial violence, in the early twentieth century; the impact of colonial hauntings on recent representations of Indonesian women workers' pasts; how the history of wartime sexual abuse continues to be mediated by the geopolitical situation in East Asia; the passionate nature of trans-Atlantic debates on the marketing of the film *Suffragette*; and, the invocation of historical narratives and production of historical controversies, as well as archives, in the global movement of Women's Marches from 2017 to 2022.

For the purposes of this special forum, it is crucial to note that memory is also gendered. We are conscious of the gendered nature of the historical record, the structured relationships and power differentials between men and women in society, and the cultural constructions of masculinity and femininity which inform and shape our understandings of history and memory. We are also cognisant of the fact that gender interacts with other dimensions of difference and their associated power differentials: ethnicity, racialised positioning, indigeneity, descent from colonisers or colonised, linguistic background, class, religion, sexual orientation, gender identity, ability and disability, age. The interactions between these dimensions of difference necessitate a theory of intersectionality.¹⁸ That is, identities are situated in the intersections of a number of categories, and these intersectional dynamics may change according to situation and across time. Guided by an understanding of intersectionality, our articles survey some recent controversies over remembering a gendered past. Stevenson's and Crozier-De Rosa and Mackie's articles directly refer to the intersectional controversies that erupted in the 2010s as women of colour were variously sidelined or omitted from, or affronted by feminist memory products and movements. Although intersectionality was not a new term, having been conceptualised by Kimberlé Crenshaw in the 1980s, the volatile mixture of gendered and racialised sensibilities and protests characterising the early twenty-first century pushed what had previously been an academic discourse of intersectionality towards an increasingly wider context.¹⁹

To return to Ferber, we train the historian's gaze on the production of memory. It is one aspect of the work of historians to facilitate an understanding of the present by 'testing claims to novelty and to improvement, to continuity or change'. We decipher 'both continuities and ruptures with the past'. To do this, we look for 'silences and omissions', as much as for what is included and visible.²⁰ In this forum, we analyse what is present and absent as histories of gendered pasts are put on display in the present, as well as

reactions to these historical representations, to further understand the relationship between history, memory and affect. In particular, we look at how trauma is represented or (re)produced in gendered forms of memorialisation.

Violence, Coloniality, Postcoloniality, Decoloniality

Informed by an understanding of gendered, racialised and geopolitical structured relationships and power differentials, our other articles pay particular attention to ways of remembering women and men in situations of violence and conflict, and the emotionally volatile contexts in and through which these gendered memories travel. McGregor and Dragojlovic analyse efforts made by an Indisch (Indo-Dutch) filmmaker to produce a documentary film which would align with current aspirations in the Netherlands—a place haunted by its violent colonial past—to decolonise the history of the Dutch East Indies by prioritising Indonesian voices. In this case, the voice being ‘heard’ was that of a fictionalised former female domestic worker in the colony of the Netherlands East Indies in the closing decades of Dutch colonial rule from 1939 to 1949. McGregor and Dragojlovic’s reading of the film suggests that, instead of achieving this aim, it was informed by a colonial matrix of power relations, especially those that relate to gender, sexuality, and the contemporary production of subjectivities. Ultimately this effort to decolonise Dutch history worked to reveal the difficulty of transcending colonial hauntings in order to move towards the decolonial future which many aspire to.

On the Pacific coast of what is now the US state of California, white colonists exacted violence on Indigenous populations. Many Indigenous women were also involved in relationships with white men, with greater or lesser degrees of coercion. In her article, Haskins focuses on the testimonies of some of these women. Their accounts, she writes, often present a frighteningly visceral description of colonial violence, such as the memories of a terrified child who saw her baby sister killed by white men. The article considers the meanings and effects these accounts have had when recounted to non-Indigenous audiences. Haskins is particularly interested in the impact on the mainly white women who interviewed the Native American women, those who served simultaneously as listeners and interlocutors. She argues that the testimonies at the heart of this article ensure that stories of Indigenous women’s violent encounters remain in the historical

record, although the records are fragile and always in danger of being lost, until retrieved by later generations.

In her article, Buchheim examines how, in addition to providing factual information about the history of militarised sexual abuse, some sites of memory use women's traumatic histories to elicit emotional and affective reactions in visitors. To do so, she presents a case study of the Liji Alley Museum in Nanjing, just one of several museums created in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century dedicated to the victims and survivors of militarised sexual abuse in the Asia-Pacific War. In particular, she highlights the persistent themes of tears—whether teary representations of victims or the actual tears of visitors—to reveal the museum's empathy-inducing tactics. She also confirms that discussions of wartime military abuse are always mediated by the geopolitical situation in East Asia, specifically here with reference to relations between Japan and the People's Republic of China.

Across our forum, we ask how geopolitics, postcolonial politics and racialised politics have shaped the affective experiences of gendered memories and silences in a number of case studies situated in museums, archives, political movements and their use of the internet, the physical sites of marches and demonstrations, material objects, and popular media representations.

History, Memory, Activism and Affect

From the early twentieth- to the twenty-first century, organisers of campaigns for gender equality, social justice and human rights have adopted a multi-layered approach to history. Many considered it crucial to cite models of successful political campaigns which can inspire future activism (for example, the abolition of slavery, the granting of suffrage, successful strike activity, independence from colonial domination) or appropriate historical precedents to motivate campaigners and get the public on side.²¹ In other cases, the past was conveyed as the very thing that needs to be transcended, such as when past customs were dismissed as 'feudal'.²² As new research by contributors to this forum shows, organisers also believed that they could build group affect and emotions (whether pride and joy or anger and resentment) through circulating historical narratives.²³ Stevenson's and Crozier-De Rosa and Mackie's articles explore what is at stake and for whom when the memories of past movements that are invoked by 'sites' of memory (film, marketing,

marching, social media campaigns) consciously or unconsciously exclude the histories or participation of vulnerable or diverse communities. In each case, the authors show that those witnessing memorialisation processes in the present are (re)traumatised by historical processes of exclusion and silencing.

At a 1913 London meeting of the Women's Social and Political Union, the suffragette Emmeline Pankhurst (1858–1928) asserted: 'I would rather be a rebel than a slave.'²⁴ When the advertising campaign for the 2015 feature film *Suffragette* quoted Pankhurst's words, even going so far as to have it printed on publicity merchandise including t-shirts worn by the cast, a trans-Atlantic controversy ensued. The phrase referenced the intertwining of the anti-slavery movements and the women's suffrage movements in nineteenth century Britain and the USA.²⁵ As Stevenson's article in this forum demonstrates, however, when the phrase 'I'd rather be a rebel than a slave' was quoted in the early twenty-first century, it became apparent that the phrase had vastly different connotations on either side of the Atlantic and among different feminist communities. Her analysis of the trans-Atlantic commentary provoked by the incident demonstrates that invoking history without sensitivity to the diverse audiences which will receive the message produces a range of emotions from anxiety to anger. Stevenson's contribution shines a light on the highly volatile nature of the emotional landscape on which the developing relationship between the construction of feminist memory and ongoing intersectional feminist activism was played out in the early twenty-first century.

Crozier-De Rosa and Mackie's article adds to discussions about the volatile nature of the emotional landscape on which feminist memory and intersectional feminist activism was played out in the early decades of the twenty-first century. It does so through examining evocations of historical precedents in the 2017 Women's March and some subsequent feminist marches, including the Rally for Abortion Justice which saw thousands of protesters take to the streets across the US in 2021, and then again in 2022. The article examines how the purposeful tactic of recalling certain pasts, to the exclusion of others, worked to generate a range of feelings, from pride to anger to trauma, which variously inculcated group solidarity and drew condemnation and dissent. It asks how historically literate (knowledgeable about *and* skilled in interpreting) the organisers, marchers and the media were about gendered and racialised histories. The historical dimension of their study is expanded through their focus on how feminist activists in recent years—those working across digital and social media platforms, as well as staging physical demonstrations

including marching—have worked to preserve their histories so that future generations of activists will have access to ‘accurate’ and inclusive feminist histories on which to base their campaigns.

Not surprisingly, in their examinations of painful memories and violent pasts, McGregor and Dragoljovic, Buchheim and Haskins evoke a range of emotional responses and positionings. McGregor and Dragoljovic demonstrate that, despite her intentions, the Dutch-Indonesian director of ‘They Call me Babu’ organised her film around feelings of colonial nostalgia. This is achieved through a composition of home movies taken during the colonial period, which show the colonial families and their domestic workers. There is, then, an unintended replication of nostalgic images of, and tropes about the colony rather than a critical engagement with colonial violence and colonial structures of power. Through taking us on a personal journey as she walks through Nanjing’s Liji Alley Museum, Buchheim provides a distinctive commentary on emotion and sites of memory. She notes that some museum professionals tend to consider that an exhibition which has little potential to evoke emotions is not worth pursuing; and explains the simultaneous emotional abundance and emotional restraint of the museum.²⁶ Tears, for example, are everywhere—acrylic tears on statues, textual commentary on weeping ‘Comfort Women’, and even a statue with water streaming from the face and directives to use the tissues provided to wipe off her tears. The experience of the author, however, was such that visitors were so closely directed to respond in a one-dimensional emotional way (that is, to only see the ‘Comfort Woman’ as a victim and to feel sorry for her) that the whole experience was one of restraining the forms of affect available to viewers. Haskins, on the other hand, offers a different reading of emotion and traumatic memory. Applying Tanana Athabascan feminist scholar Dian Million’s ‘felt theory’ (an Indigenous feminist approach to affect and history), she argues that Native American women’s personal narratives are defined by emotions: ‘we *feel* our histories as well as think them’.²⁷ In their narratives, the women used testimonies of affect, not to induce tears, argues Haskins, but to establish themselves as carriers of truth and as witnesses to history. Agency for feeling sits with the women who experienced the trauma, not directed by those who mediated their history.

Conclusion

Taken together, the articles in this forum remind us that remembering the past, campaigning for a more ethical representation of history, and imagining and fighting for a better future all feed into each other to form a memory-activism nexus.²⁸ They demonstrate that generations of women in very different circumstances have sought to tell their stories, to preserve their histories. Seen through a gendered lens and with attention to intersectionality, they also remind us of the complexities of the relationship between history, memory, agency and affect. For example, Native American women used testimonies of affect to tell their histories and to establish themselves as truth tellers. The degree to which largely white women interviewers mediated these stories complicates the notion of agency and representation. Still, in the telling, these fragile histories of gender, dispossession and violence are recorded. On the other hand, as this forum has demonstrated, remembering women traumatised by violence in sites of memory, like film and exhibitions, can be directed by the emotions of museum protocols (empathy), geopolitics (including shame) and national hauntings and narratives (for example, guilt/shame complexes). As historians, we have paid attention not only to the presence but also to the absence of some memories. Not including certain groups in acts of remembering has served to further traumatize these women as they have had to once again establish their historical presence and reaffirm the value of their contributions to the building of society. This is apparent in the cases of women of colour originally being omitted from the organising committee of the 2017 Women's March; histories of slavery not being considered when movie slogans were devised; or not being included in the initially successful 'all-white' design for a statue to American women's suffragism in New York's Central Park. This collection has revealed that while some versions of the past occupy a privileged and robust place in mainstream societies, other memories are fragile, gendered, racialised, ethnicised, nationalised. It has also exposed ongoing work to document, preserve and disseminate gender history through the efforts of memory-activists in the present. What remains to be seen is how these grassroots memory campaigns, often conducted both digitally and materially, will serve future generations of activists, those fighting for gender equality, social justice and human rights.

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- ¹⁵ Erll, 'Travelling Memory', 6–7.
- ¹⁶ Erll, 'Travelling Memory', 12.
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- ²⁰ Ferber, *Bioethics in Historical Perspective*, 7.
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- ²⁶ Linda Norris and Rainey Tisdale, 'Developing a Toolkit for Emotion in Museums', *Exhibition* 36, no. 1 (2017), 103.
- ²⁷ Dian Million, 'Felt Theory: An Indigenous Feminist Approach to Affect and History,' *Wicazo Sa Review* (2009): 54–76.

²⁸ Ann Rigney, 'Remembering Hope: Transnational Activism Beyond the Traumatic', *Memory Studies* 11, no. 3 (2018), 368–380.